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The Thorny Path to a National Black Museum

By Kate Taylor

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In the late 1970s, when Lonnie G. Bunch III had his first job at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, veterans of the Tuskegee Airmen, the all-black squadron, accused the museum of playing down their contributions during World War II. In response, the museum asked some of the African-Americans on staff to allow their faces to be used on mannequins, increasing the "black presence" in its exhibits.



"I didn't do it," Mr. Bunch said recently, who was among those asked. "That's not the way I wanted to be part of a museum."

Thirty years later Mr. Bunch, and African-American history itself, are part of a Smithsonian museum, but in a very different way. As the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Mr. Bunch, 58, is charged with creating an institution that embodies the story of black life in America.

The pressure couldn't be greater. To open in 2015, in a \$500 million building designed to evoke the art of an ancient West African kingdom, the museum will stand at the geographic center of American civic identity, on the National Mall.

Since Mr. Bunch was appointed in 2005 -- two years after the museum was created by an act of Congress -- he and his staff have been racing at full speed, commissioning the building, amassing a collection, reaching out to potential donors and future visitors. But as their deadline approaches, and grand dreams have to be refined into gallery layouts and exhibition plans, they are not only juggling details and a \$250 million fund-raising campaign, but also grappling with fundamental questions about the museum's soul and message.

Among the biggest, of course, is: What story will it tell? As part of the Smithsonian, the museum bears the burden of being the "official" -- that is, the government's -- version of black history, but it will also carry the hopes and aspirations of African-Americans. Will its tale be primarily one of pain, focused on America's history of slavery and racial oppression, and memorializing black suffering? Or will it emphasize the uplifting part of the story, highlighting the richness of African-American culture, celebrating the bravery of civil rights heroes and documenting black "firsts" in fields like music, art, science and sports? Will the story end with the country's having overcome its shameful history and approaching a state of racial harmony and equality? Or will the museum argue that the legacy of racism is still dominant -- and, if so, how will it make that case? [Read this full [article](#) online at the *New York Times*.]